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“Levels of Fellowship”: A Response

Kurt E. Marquart

A video-taped presentation, “Conversations: Inter-Christian Relationships,” was recently sent to every circuit of our Synod, with the recommendation that it be shown to the widest possible audience and that reactions and responses be sent back to St. Louis. Since the presentation is public, and in no sense confidential, and since it deals with matters crucial to the integrity of our Synod’s confessional position, this response is public also. Our chief concern is with the advocacy of “levels of fellowship” as a key notion or building block for a theological solution of our Synod’s present fellowship problems. It is the burden of our critique that the “levels of fellowship” scheme, as it has been put forward so far, is (1) theologically confused and confusing and (2), given the known context, misleading and damaging in its foreseeable consequences.

1. Theological Confusion

Although Dr. Nafzger claims that the “levels of fellowship” scheme “forces us to come clean and to give definitions to the terms that we use,” his own treatment of the matter lends little support to this claim. This is all the more astonishing as the video is not a first attempt, but something that should have profited from the ample criticism generated by previous versions of that same proposal.¹ It is probably in response to such criticism that the video expressly specifies two meanings of “fellowship” to which the notion of “levels” does not apply. One is external church fellowship (pulpit and altar fellowship), and the other is that internal bond of fellowship with Christ and all Christians which is saving faith itself. Neither of these, Dr. Nafzger rightly observes, can be treated in terms of “levels.” That admission should have put an end to the whole matter, since thereby the only two theologically relevant meanings of “fellowship” have been ruled out. (Apology VII-VIII, for instance, speaks only of the “association of outward things and rites” and of the “association of faith and of the

Holy Spirit in the hearts” [par. 5] but of nothing in between. The German has *Gesellschaft* [association] and *Gemeinschaft* [fellowship] respectively, but can also use the latter term for the former, pars. 3,12.)

Dr. Nafzger argues, however, that still a third meaning of “fellowship” is possible, namely that contained in phrases like “good fellowship,” “fellowship hall,” “fellowship eating” (?) and “fellowship club.” But if this is the sort of thing to which “levels of fellowship” is meant to refer, then we are faced with a *katabasis eis allo genos*, that is, from the sublime to the ridiculous. For when “fellowship hall fellowship” is cashed out concretely it must yield sub-species like “rummage sale fellowship,” “sauerkraut fellowship,” “bingo fellowship,” etc. It is clear that “levels of fellowship” talk is not needed to cope with such non-issues. Dr. Nafzger himself notes that “there we’re simply talking about enjoying each other’s company and liking to be with one another and that context...” He continues at once that “it’s important that we begin to distinguish and be more precise in the way we talk about fellowship.” What follows is as close as we ever get to an explanation of what is really meant by “levels of fellowship”:

When we talk about levels of fellowship, at least when I talk about levels of fellowship, I was addressing that problem of how can we relate to those whom we recognize on the basis of their confession, Billy Graham for example, as a brother in Christ, but with whom we disagree in the confession of our faith in Jesus Christ. And we say these differences are important, but we continue to have a relationship with him, even though it’s not the kind of relationship that we call altar and pulpit fellowship.

This is really a *non-sequitur*. Dr. Nafzger has himself just established three meanings of “fellowship,” two of which admittedly cannot be divided into “levels.” Are we meant then to “relate” to Billy Graham in terms of the only remaining category, that of “fellowship hall fellowship”? If so, the whole thing is trivial; if not, it is a muddle. The clue to the real nature of the difficulty appears to lie in what follows directly:

Bohlmann: So what you’re really saying with that terminology whether you use “levels of fellowship” or

“levels of relationship,” which may be a little less ambiguous for a lot of people in the church, is that Christian people today, and this has always been true, exist and live out their Christian life and action in a variety of relationships simultaneously, ranging all the way from a kind of minimal agreement, I suppose, but nonetheless important unity that we have among all of us who believe in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, ranging all the way from a relatively minimal agreement in this faith, all the way over to the other end of the continuum, where we have full agreement in the whole doctrine of the Gospel as taught in the Scripture, and then establish fellowship and have a strong altar and pulpit fellowship, unity of confession. You’re suggesting, as I think I am too, that between one end and the other end of this continuum, the Christian finds himself at various levels and various points where there are agreements, but at some points disagreements, and that we need to be perhaps more precise in identifying what we can do as a result of where we find ourselves in a relationship at any point.

Nafzger. Precisely.

As sociological description, as a *prima facie* impression of some bafflements created by the tragedy of Christian divisions, all this may be unexceptionable, and even eloquent. As theological analysis, however, or as a proposed theological remedy, the approach embodies a fatal flaw, that of a category mistake. Sociologically, that is, when describing appearances and so walking by sight rather than by faith, one may perhaps speak of a “continuum” of “relationships,” with complete pulpit and altar fellowship at one end, and the invisible fellowship of faith as ideal limit at the other. It is perfectly true, for example, that baptised Christians of different confessions have more in common with each other than they do with non-Christians. Nor have orthodox Lutherans ever doubted the validity and the efficacy of the public ministry and of its ministrations of such means of grace as were retained within heterodox but still Trinitarian churches (Roman Catholic or Calvinist). (It was left to modern quasi-Lutherans, in negotiations with neo-Anglicans, to invent, or rather adopt, the

pseudo-problem of “mutual recognition” of the validity of ministries.) But confessional Lutherans have never regarded this as grounds for viewing fellowship, in the theological sense, as a multi-level continuum, with “full” church fellowship at one extreme and “mere” or “minimal” (!) saving faith at the other:

There are even those who suppose that they can establish degrees of unity. The degrees match the level of agreement reached so far in the discussions. The consensus one tries to read out of Article VII [of the Augsburg Confession] is in all such cases a purely human arrangement. . . Not the agreement in doctrine...but only the consensus in the *pure* doctrine and in the *right* administration of the sacraments is the consensus demanded in the Augsburg Confession [H. Sasse, *We Confess the Church*, p. 67].

Interconfessional relations are nowadays sometimes so arranged that where church fellowship is complete there is mutual welcoming of the laity to the Sacrament and of the clergy to its celebration, while where church fellowship is incomplete the laity may mutually receive the Sacrament but the clergy may not mutually celebrate it. Such gradations and distinctions in church fellowship have absolutely no connection with the regulations of the early church. . . Either there was or there was not fellowship between two churches or two bishops, which practically amounted to the same thing. . . Never did the relations between two churches and their bishops provide for permitting the laity to receive the Sacrament while denying the clergy the privilege of officiating in it because church fellowship was somehow incomplete or because the congregations or their bishops were of different confessions or only in partial confessional agreement. There was either complete fellowship or none at all [W. Elert, *Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries*, p. 164].

Like the church herself, the fellowship of the church is one and indivisible: *communio una est*. The two theological meanings of “fellowship” (*koinoonia*), the internal and the external, are not two different and separate fellowships, but

two distinct but in principle unseparated aspects of the *one* fellowship of the church. Unlike Calvinism, Lutheran teaching does not divide the church invisible and the church visible into two churches. Rather, there is only one church, considered either properly speaking as the believers or more broadly speaking as the same believers gathered round the external Gospel and Sacraments of Christ, plus the unbelieving “hangers-on.” What keeps these two aspects or “modes” of the one church from flying apart into two churches is precisely the biblical, evangelical doctrine that the external Gospel and Sacraments are not mere outward symbols or formalities which may or may not be accompanied by spiritual efficacy, but are powerful, faith-creating—and therefore church-creating—*media salutis* (instruments of salvation) imparting forgiveness, life, and salvation. Since there can be no faith apart from these external means of grace, the Gospel and Sacraments also keep the internal fellowship of faith and the external fellowship in the means of grace from splitting apart into two fellowships. Rather, the one fellowship of the church consists of the internal bond of faith and of the external bond of the evangelical confession (pure Gospel and Sacraments).

Now, to insert between these twin “poles” of internal and external fellowship a whole “continuum” of sociological “relationships,” and then to think and talk of this disparate mixture of apples and oranges as “levels of fellowship,” is to reduce the doctrine of fellowship to incoherence. Firstly, the very notion of such a “continuum” implies that without it there would be a gap, an empty space, in short, a separation, between internal and external church fellowship. Secondly, the scheme relativizes the true, God-given, Gospel-based external fellowship of the church (basically pulpit and altar fellowship) by making it part of a continuum with all sorts of other things. As part of a continuum, pulpit and altar fellowship then differs only in degree but not in kind from all sorts of other, purely human arrangements. Although lip service may still be paid to pulpit and altar fellowship, in practice it is relegated now to an ideal (“extreme”?) at one end of a scale, with most other manifestations (levels) of fellowship to be expected nearer the middle or the other end of the continuum. Thirdly, this sociologizing reductionism affects even the understanding of faith itself. To speak with the video of the “important unity

that we have among all of us who believe in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior” as a “relatively minimal agreement in this faith” is misleading. An outward dogmatic consensus among individuals of different confessions may indeed be “minimal,” but it does not express the oneness of faith which we in fact do have with all Christians. Since only the Holy Spirit can and does create faith in the hearts of Christians, and since He is the Spirit of truth, He works the same true faith in all, namely, the one faith in the one Lord, imparted and confessed in the one baptism (Eph. 4:5). Any aberrations from that one faith come not from the Holy Spirit but from our own sinful flesh and constitute not “faith” but its opposite (Matt. 16:21-23; Rom. 16:17-18). The true, internal unity of faith and of the church remains, of course, in this life an article of faith, not of sight, since our “life is hid with Christ in God” (Col.3:3). Fourthly, the “levels” scheme focuses more on individuals (“Christians”) than on the *church* and on *churches*. This fosters subjectivism and suggests that beside the internal and external fellowship of the church there is also a hybrid *tertium quid* (something third), a “Christian fellowship” short of church fellowship. The one church and her fellowship come to public and legitimate expression precisely in her pure marks, the pure preaching of the Gospel and the right administration of the Sacraments. To wish to express an “*una sancta* fellowship” apart from or even contrary to these marks is enthusiasm. It is also enthusiasm to treat Christians, for purposes of church fellowship, as isolated individuals, apart from the altars and pulpits to which they are attached.² In this context it is alarming that Dr. Nafzger’s “levels of fellowship” approach is expressly designed to accommodate both Luther’s and Schleiermacher’s conceptions of fellowship!³

In sum, the “levels of fellowship” scheme slices up the living, organic fullness of the fellowship of the church, and makes its component elements appear like disconnected and desiccated items artificially arranged, together with alien material, into a false pattern. In one of his video speeches, for instance, Dr. Nafzger says that in John and the rest of Scripture the term “fellowship” is used “most frequently, not exclusively” to refer to the inner unity of Christians in Christ. As if St. John could possibly have thought of fellowship in Christ without including in that thought the mediating three that bear

witness on earth: the spirit, the water, and the blood (1 John 5:8)! And then Dr. Nafzger continues as though the orthodox understanding of fellowship were a recent "Missourian" peculiarity: "We in the Missouri Synod, however, have picked up on and used that word 'fellowship' most commonly to refer to what we would today recognize as a church body level of relationship." These confusions may be put into proper perspective by way of dramatic contrast with this genuinely Lutheran exposition from the pen of Dr. H. Sasse:

To search for a new and closer relation between [Lutheran, Reformed, and Union] churches would be both thinkable and praiseworthy. But whatever one might call such a relation, the expression "church fellowship" for it is impossible, since this has a fixed meaning in the teaching and church law of the Lutheran church (and not only in that church), a meaning going back to the earliest church and one deeply rooted in the New Testament. It is the fellowship which, within the one, holy, catholic church, joins believing individuals and their local congregations to the unity of the body of Christ. It is fellowship of the church, not of the churches; unless one understands churches to be local congregations or dioceses, each of which is *the* church of Christ, *the* people of God, in the place concerned (for example, in Jerusalem, in Corinth, in Ephesus, in Rome).

The biblical word for this fellowship is *koinoonia*, *communio*. This *koinoonia* differs from other fellowships in that it is not of human origin, and in that it reaches beyond the sphere of the earthly and human. . .

It, rather, is produced by the divine means of grace, the Word of God and the Sacraments of Christ. "That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:3, see also 6,7). . . The fellowship is established by Baptism and finds its concrete expression in the Sacrament of the breaking of bread. This fits to a nicety the language of Paul: God called the believers "into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 1:9); "By one

Spirit we were baptised into one body. . .and all were made to drink of one Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:13). The connection with the Lord's Supper is quite clear in 1 Corinthians 10:16-17; the *koinoonia* of the body and blood of Christ is one with the *koinoonia* of the church. . .For the *koinoonia* which exists among the believers, the saints according to the New Testament, finds its clearest expression in the fellowship of those who receive the body and blood of the Lord as they assemble around His Table. "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the *koinoonia tou haimatos tou Christou* (fellowship of the blood of Christ)?" (1 Cor. 10:16). The fellowship is not brought about by the actions of blessing and breaking, but by the content of the cup and the bread: "For one bread [it is], one body we are, the many, for we all partake of one bread" (v. 17). . .This passage shows how closely the idea of the Church as the Body of Christ is tied up with the idea of the sacramental body in the Sacrament.⁴

Although Karl Rahner's own theology is not exactly an exercise in simplification, his comment is worth noting here:

One question which is recognized to be very urgent is that of *communicatio in sacris*. There is a danger that in practice people will soon cease to pay any further heed to the prescriptions of both the Catholic and the non-Catholic church authorities. The rules which have hitherto been in force in this sphere are not simple and imaginative enough and, on the contrary, give the impression of a somewhat illogical compromise.⁵

It is to be feared that "levels of fellowship" will only render our present confusions worse confounded. Of course, it is not to be expected that a mystery of faith—and the church is such a mystery—can be made plain in a few journalistic "sound bites" (or "sight bites," for that matter). There is, however, a compelling internal logic, simplicity, and consistency inherent in the biblical, evangelical, Lutheran approach to church fellowship. That internal logic is well set out in the Overseas Committee's theses on "Fellowship in Its Necessary Context of the Doctrine of the Church," presented to the recessed forty-sixth convention of the Synodical Conference. Omitting biblical and confessional references, here are the basic conclusions of that most significant document:

12. The fellowship created by Word and Sacraments shows itself fundamentally in pulpit and altar fellowship. It can show itself in many other ways, some of which, like prayer and worship and love of the brethren, the church cannot do without; others of which, like the holy kiss or the handshake or the reception into one's house, vary from place to place and from time to time. In whatever way the fellowship created by Word and Sacraments shows itself, all visible manifestations of fellowship must be truthful and in accordance with the supreme demands of the marks of the church. The "sacred things" (*sacra*) are the means of grace, and only by way of them is anything else a "sacred thing" (*sacrum*). . .

13. Prayer is not one of the marks of the church and should not be coordinated with Word and Sacraments, as though it were essentially of the same nature as they. As a response to the divine Word, it is an expression of faith and a fruit of faith, and when spoken before others, a profession of faith: As a profession of faith it must be in harmony with and under the control of the marks of the church. . .

This statement bears within it (a) the implication that the member churches of the Synodical Conference have not enunciated and carried through the principles outlined in it in their documents of fellowship with the necessary clarity and consistency, and (b) the suggestion that the goal of the Synodical Conference discussion is to be reached by the traditional highway of the doctrine of the church. Since the premature turning off into the byway of fellowship has led to a dead end, it would seem best, first of all, to return to the highway and there move forward together guided only by the marks of the church.⁶

2. Foreseeable Consequences

In and of itself the phrase "levels of fellowship" could, of course, have a perfectly good and valid meaning. For instance, it could reflect the very important fact that church fellowship needs to be expressed (or refused!) appropriately at all relevant levels of our church life—local parish, district, Synod. Such a usage, however, would not slice up church fellowship itself into "levels," but would simply note different organizational levels

of application. In our present situation, however, the fact is that both the origins and some of the known applications of the concept “levels of fellowship” are unsound. Dr. Bohlmann remarks on the video: “Some have taken this whole talk of levels as it has gone on in our discussion in the last year or so and suggested to others that this concept is borrowed from liberal Christianity, that it’s intended to lead our Synod down some primrose path to be irresponsible in effect in terms of our relationship to others. That clearly is not what we are trying to do.” Of course, that is not the intention of our reverend colleagues on the video. Dr. Bohlmann is mistaken, however, when he suggests that “levels of fellowship” is *not* “borrowed from liberal Christianity,” or at least from liberal Lutheranism.

The genealogy of “levels of fellowship” may be traced as follows: On 22 August 1953 Professors Kinder of Muenster and von Krause of Neuendettelsau by request transmitted to President Stolz of the United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Australia a memorandum entitled “*Cooperation and Federation of Churches*, with special attention to the principles valid for Evangelical Lutheran churches, and to the Lutheran World Federation” (our translation). In his painstaking analysis and critique of this document Dr. Hans-Lutz Poetsch pointed out its central fallacy: “. . .depending on the measure of the *consensus* or *dissensus* existing between churches, the possibility is conceded, and in part even demanded, of a looser or tighter connection—also in *internis*. Thereby *consensus* and *dissensus* are measured *not qualitatively but quantitatively*, which yields a fundamentally different posture toward false doctrine.”⁷

A few years later these same matters were discussed between the constituent synods of the expiring National Lutheran Council (which were also members of the Lutheran World Federation) and the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. These discussions eventually resulted in the formation of the now defunct Lutheran Council in the USA. A crucial difference between the two parties was precisely the matter of “levels of fellowship.” At a meeting in 1960 LC-MS President J.W. Behnken presented his Synod’s position as ruling out in principle *cooperatio in sacris* (cooperation in sacred matters)

with the National Lutheran Council member churches. He gave an unambiguous definition of unionism on behalf of the Missouri Synod: "In essence religious unionism consists in joint worship and work of those who are not united in doctrine."⁸ One of the counter-questions put to Dr. Behnken in the course of the discussion was: "Are there not different levels of cooperation possible according to degrees of unity?"

One of the leading Missouri Synod representatives in these discussions, Dr. M. Franzmann, put it like this: "The NLC presentation looks toward a variety of ecumenical relationships and envisages degrees or stages of fellowship proportionate to the degree of consensus which has been attained. The Missouri presentation is oriented toward doctrinal confessional unity between Lutherans and raises the question of the *damnamus* as indispensable to the proclamation of the Gospel as both a savor of life and a savor of death."⁹ By contrast, NLC representative Conrad Bergendoff wrote:

Even those whose profession of faith may be less comprehensive than the confessions may have a certain unity with Christians of other confessions, because of significant agreements in the preaching of the Gospel. In short we may claim that in the degree to which we can come to a common understanding of the Gospel, in that degree we are able to work together in the ministry of reconciliation. . . With other Christians who profess faith in the Gospel, Lutherans may recognize a partial unity by a fellowship of certain types of common evangelism and even forms of prayer and thanksgiving, while working toward a more complete unity expressed in pulpit and altar fellowship. . . The proposition of complete unity or none at all cannot be defended on scriptural grounds, nor is it the description of the relations between Christians in church history. Rather the Scriptures teach a unity between the believer and the Redeemer which issues in a unity between believers that varies according to circumstances.¹⁰

Now, Dr. Nafzger himself has stated on the video that the topic of "levels of fellowship" for his seminal paper on the subject had been assigned to him by the Lutheran Council in the USA, which of course included the heirs of the old National Lutheran Council. The pedigree of the concept, therefore, is

crystal clear.¹¹ That in itself, of course, does not prove that Dr. Nafzger's own use of that phrase is objectionable. More ominous is the pro-unionistic use to which "levels of fellowship" language was already being put within the Missouri Synod *before* Dr. Nafzger launched his series of presentations on the subject. The 17 June 1985 *Reporter* states that the Atlantic District Convention voted " 'to affirm inter-Lutheran relations' by imploring[!] the Synod's 1986 convention to acknowledge that 'decisions regarding the exercise of fellowship at the congregational level are best made at the congregational level.' "

On the video both Dr. Bohlmann and Dr. Nafzger reject this sort of "selective fellowship," and Dr. Bohlmann states his opposition to joint services with churches not in altar and pulpit fellowship with our Synod. The theological rationale for such judgments, however, has become fuzzier than it used to be, and a tendency appears, also on the video, to compensate for this by appealing to the "covenant" of the synodical constitution, which as such represents purely human rather than divine authority.

Dr. Bohlmann remarks, Dr. Nafzger concurring: "The two ideas, levels and selective fellowship really have nothing in common in my judgment." But Dr. Nafzger's very definition of pulpit and altar fellowship as "a church body level of relationship" invites opponents of our Synod's stand to argue, exactly as did the Atlantic District Convention in 1985: Very well, but then at the local level, allow us to practice fellowship as we see fit, even though at the national level we cannot do so. That is selective fellowship! Nor does it help when Dr. Nafzger, having called "selective fellowship" a "very confusing term," himself misdefines it as "a decision by the denomination as a whole, as the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, if we were to do something like that, to let individual congregations decide with whom they are going to practice altar and pulpit fellowship." This means that "selective fellowship" cannot by definition be practiced in our Synod, since our "denomination as a whole" has not decided to do so. The whole point of selective fellowship is that everyone does what seems best to him, with or without formal authority from anybody else. And so President Richard Hinz of our Southeast-

ern District can, in the October 1988 issue of his official district newsletter, hail the video as a long-expected presidential “‘initiative’ on levels of fellowship,” and then extol the virtues of “a joint Reformation Service” with the ELCA (this year with a notorious ELCA “pastress” as preacher in Washington, D.C.). Yet according to the letter of Dr. Nafzger’s organizationally oriented definition, these and similar instances of flagrant unionism do not constitute “selective fellowship.”

In April 1985 the Southeastern District of the LC-MS adopted Resolution 85-05-02, “To Express Consensus in Inter-Christian Relationships.” The following points are among the “broad principles reflecting the consensus” of the district’s “thought regarding inter-Christian relationships”:

4. Decisions regarding the exercise of fellowship on the local level are best made at the local level. . .

9. There is a growing recognition that an “all or nothing,” “either/or” approach to fellowship is inadequate.

10. Christian relationships differ at various levels: international, national, church body, synod, district, congregation, and individual, and may require diverse and appropriate responses.

Again, the Pentecost 1987 issue of *The Atlantic District News* carried an official “Fellowship Report,” prepared by a District Task Force. The report argued, in part:

Any question of fellowship must also recognize the different levels of fellowship that exist between congregations and Synod. As our survey points out, two distinct types of fellowship stand side by side.

One is the local pulpit and altar fellowship of a particular congregation. . .

The other side of fellowship is that which is formulated through a common agreement of congregations. The Synod is one example of the kind of fellowship that unites congregations far from one another in a common mission and ministry and obligates them to accept one another’s communicants. The pulpit and altar fellowship between Synods is also this kind of fellowship. . .

Problems result when documents fail to distinguish

between these types of fellowship and therefore fail to respect the differences. Fellowship, the kind between Synods, is more reflected in the document *The Nature and Implications of the Concept of Fellowship*. The local fellowship of a particular congregation is something quite different. It has yet to be addressed by any document from CTCR.

...Our survey is reflective of the local fellowship that exists between a particular altar and pulpit and other Christians, and not the Synod as a whole. Although the Synod has disputed the claim that selective fellowship is an option, that view is not shared by congregations of the Atlantic District. It appears from the survey that Atlantic District parishes feel that they have not only the right, but the obligation to decide these issues on their own.

When “levels of fellowship” talk is widely exploited in the interests of a unionistic theology, proponents of it will have to do better than remark lamely: “That is not what we are talking about.” If the new approach is to claim the virtue of being able to cope with the way things really are—as distinct from “ivory tower” abstractions—then it must demonstrate at the very least an ability to withstand and correct flagrant abuses of its terminology. So far the “levels initiative” has failed to articulate norms and definitions by which the proper use of “levels of fellowship” language might even be distinguished from abuses, let alone defended.

The most promising move toward credible theological controls is Dr. Bohlmann’s reference, early in the video, to “our long tradition of distinguishing between what we can do in what we call fellowship in sacred things, *communio in sacris* was the technical term for that, and on the other hand, cooperation in external things, *cooperatio in externis*, the dogmaticians called it.” Standing as it does already under a certain pall of the past tense, the statement is completely non-functional in the argument. Actually, it stands in flat contradiction to the whole “levels” scheme, for the latter posits a “continuum” of entities differing from each other in degree, not in kind, whereas the *in sacris—in externis* distinction means that fellowship as a whole differs sharply and qualitatively from mere cooperation in externals. Dr. Bohl-

mann comments: "We have long recognized that there can be various levels of interaction with other Christians, and that the amount or degree of doctrinal agreement is a key factor in determining what we can do together, if indeed we can do anything at all." But if the controlling category is fellowship vs. mere cooperation in externals, how can the "amount or degree of doctrinal agreement" be a "key factor"? Either there is agreement in the pure Gospel and the right administration of the Sacraments, and then there is fellowship, or there is no such agreement and therefore no fellowship. But cooperation in externals requires no doctrinal agreement at all. Can we not freely cooperate with Buddhists and atheists in various worthy civil endeavors? What has doctrine to do with it? In other words, "levels of fellowship" and the old *in sacris-in externis* distinction define two different and fundamentally incompatible frames of reference or "models" of fellowship.

It is disturbing that Dr. Bohlmann brings up the former Lutheran Council in the USA as an example of "levels of interaction" (levels of fellowship) based on "the amount or degree of doctrinal agreement." Dr. Behnken, on the contrary, had ruled out fellowship (*cooperatio in sacris*) from the outset, and had limited the cooperation to externals (see endnote 8). The chief "selling point" of the new Council were the mandatory theological discussions among the member churches of the Council. It was this that Dr. Behnken stressed in his plea to the delegates of the 1965 Detroit Convention of the LC-MS. That Convention would never have agreed to the Council as an expression of a "level of fellowship."¹² It is also worth noting that shortly before his death a disillusioned Dr. Behnken told Queensland District (Australia) President Emeritus F. W. Noack that, had he known beforehand how the Lutheran Council in the USA would actually turn out, he would never have supported participation in it.¹³ "Levels of fellowship" talk, incidentally, is *particularly* unsuited to the present inter-Lutheran situation.¹⁴ When speaking of our common Reformation heritage, and so on, we must make it clear that we are speaking basically of disfranchised "grass roots" individuals and not of the ELCA and its official echelons as such. When the evangelical substance of our Confessions is surrendered and compromised, then the Lutheran name and lip-service actually make matters worse, because more

seductive.¹⁵ To treat such deceptive formalities as establishing some “level of agreement” or grounds for a “level of fellowship” is to foster illusions.

Nor is the “levels” model helped or clarified by the way in which it is contrasted with the Wisconsin Synod’s “unit concept.” Having cited Wisconsin’s definition, “Church fellowship should therefore be treated as a unit concept covering every joint expression, manifestation, and demonstration of a common faith,” Dr. Bohlmann comments: “Now in distinction to that point of view, our Missouri Synod has spoken of levels of relationships for some time.” Well, yes and no. First of all, “relationships” here must really mean “fellowship,” if it is to be relevant. Secondly, not everything said and done by the Missouri Synod on this score in the last few decades has necessarily been sound. Thirdly, while it is perfectly true that the Wisconsin Synod’s “unit concept” is open to serious theological objection, such criticism must be “on target.” What is wrong with Wisconsin’s formulation is not the idea that church fellowship is basically one indivisible “unit”—that is a Confessional Lutheran commonplace—but rather the impossibly broad and all-inclusive definition of this “unit” as “covering every joint expression. . . .” Introducing “levels of fellowship”—that is what “levels of relationships” must mean here—as a cure, really attacks the “unit concept” for the wrong reason and so skews the whole discussion.

Actually the real objection to Wisconsin’s “unit concept” applies to “levels of fellowship” as well. To form a fair judgment here, as free as possible of a narrow “Missouri” or “Wisconsin” bias, one should turn to the theological help given on request by our overseas sister churches in the early 1960s, when the Synodical Conference was breaking up. Both the Australian and the European sister churches sent detailed critiques of the four Synodical Conference member churches’ official statements on fellowship. The Europeans¹⁶ faulted the Wisconsin definition basically for its orientation to individual, personal faith, rather than to the objective marks of the church. They criticized the two-part (as it then was) “Theology of Fellowship” presented by Missouri’s newly formed CTCR even more severely, and basically for the same reason. The first of five “fundamental mistakes” is described thus:

An individualism which reminds one of the Reformed American type. The document says: "The passages quoted to show the need for refusing to practice fellowship with certain people under certain circumstances are particularly the following: . . ." All comments following deal only with footloose individuals, an almost shocking fact. Christians are treated throughout the study as though they could be seen as Christians and as though the claims of men to be Christian would, irrespective of *notae* (the marks), at once put [us] under obligation to accept that claim or to prove that the particular individual is no Christian.¹⁷

With the stress on individual "Christians," rather than on churches, pure doctrine and the pure marks become fuzzy and recede into the background: "As a result heresy cannot be seen properly as a revolt against God's revelation and the foundation of the one church, and fellowship with heresy is not seen as bringing in a counter-church against the one church."

It is clear that if we must first riddle about the personal spiritual status of individuals, the application of Romans 16:17 and all parallel texts becomes problematical if not impossible. But if the categories are objective (churches, church fellowship, orthodoxy, heterodoxy), then the New Testament condemnations of false teaching and false teachers apply directly and with full force.

Wisconsin's condemnation of "levels of fellowship," be it noted, was not only not criticized but was warmly commended as "perfectly correct." The Wisconsin document had described it as an "untenable position...C. To envision fellowship relations (in a congregation, in a church body, in a federation, in a church agency, in a cooperative church activity) like so many steps of a ladder, each requiring a gradual increasing or decreasing measure of unity in doctrine and practice."¹⁸ Elsewhere it was pointed out that this laudable position—"perhaps the most important sentence of the whole document"—was really jeopardized by Wisconsin's individualistic, subjective starting point in "faith" ("every joint expression. . . of a common faith"), rather than in the objective *pure marks*: "Logic asks: why should not always so much public activation of the brotherhood be possible as can at any time

be jointly expressed, if the law of action must be won from the inner dynamic of the believer?"¹⁹

The final stricture against the CTCR's "Theology of Fellowship" was bafflingly similar: "(e) *Degrees of church fellowship, such as proposed in the Gutachten of von Krause and Kinder. . . and extended to the point of the 'Branch Theory' as generally assumed to constitute the accepted basis for the World Council of Churches, cannot be negated on an individualistic basis which lacks *notae purae* (pure marks) orientation.*"²⁰ The official Australian (ELCA) critique put it like this:

The tendency throughout—and it is intentional—is not to speak of churches, but to speak of individuals. For with them, in accordance with the subjective *roton pseudos* at the basis of the whole presentation, we can. . . distinguish those who are plainly not of Christ. . . and those who are true Christians. . .

Surely one must see that the true counterpart in our day to the false teachers of the New Testament age are the heterodox church bodies themselves. . . The false teachings given a refuge in heterodox bodies are every whit as bad as the false teachings known in the New Testament. . . And the New Testament condemnation of false teachers should be applied to them directly and without any softening of the rebuke.

The preoccupation with individuals, to the relative neglect of the church and of churches as such, is precisely the central problem of the "levels of fellowship" scheme. Regardless of anyone's personal purity of intention, objectively the scheme opens wide doors and windows to the powerful cultural winds of individualism and of a sentimentally tinged pragmatism. Far from counteracting the spirit of the times, it can only reinforce the popular model of a "privatized" religion, in which the individual is supreme, and the church is perceived basically as an emotional "support group," to be joined, used, left, and exchanged for another, according to the felt needs of the sovereign, autonomous individual consumer.

Conclusion

It should be abundantly clear that “levels of fellowship” is so heavily burdened with an alien theological dynamic and thrust²¹ that it can serve only to confuse and destroy, but never to advance and clarify the proper understanding of church fellowship among us. This is clearly understood by opponents of our Synod’s historic stand, like Southeastern District President Hinz, who welcomes the video as signalling a change of direction—initially simply by reopening the question.²² Of course, it is “all right,” in itself, “to ask questions.” It is high time, however, to give clear and sound answers, and therefore to abandon any further attempts to introduce or justify “levels of fellowship” as a serious theological model.

We are well aware that there are indeed grey areas in which judgments will differ. Nor do we advocate a mass of legalistic rules and regulations, or a draconian enforcement of such rules as there are. On the contrary, Evangelical Lutheran practice must follow from Evangelical Lutheran theology. Situations may be ever so complex, but the basic theology of fellowship, in which the pure Gospel and Sacraments are pivotal, is simple and straightforward. If that were clear, and held and respected in common by all, minor variations in application would do no harm. A continuum of “levels,” on the other hand, suggests a continuum of principles, till finally every situation is its own principle, so that there really are no principles at all.

None of this is meant in any way to attribute any heretical intent or teaching to Doctors Bohlmann and Nafzger, respected brothers whom the church has honored with the heavy burden and responsibility of high office. Nor, on the other hand, would we trouble the church with a mere squabble about words. We would much rather have settled this whole matter within a more restricted forum, such as that of the CTCR, which is presently working on this very thing. We deeply regret that what we respectfully regard as a serious error of judgment—the video “jumps the gun” with its improvised *ad hoc* “theology in a hurry,” before the CTCR has completed its study²³—compels us to seek a public clarification of the confused situation, beginning with a joint return to first principles.

As a matter of sound policy the Board for Communication Services should also be respectfully urged to refrain from issuing videos on serious theological subjects, when such videos are more likely to inflame passion than to enlighten judgment. We refer to Pastor P. Devantier's 27 September 1988 letter to Dr. Nafzger, in response to the CTCR's request for printed transcripts of the video. Pastor Devantier offered free copies of the video instead, arguing that "a message conveyed through the medium of video is made up of a variety of components such as the set, the style, tone, pacing and inflection of the speakers and the interaction between participants. All of these vital components are absent in a printed transcript. In other words, a printed transcript containing only the words does not do justice to a message conveyed through the video medium." If this is so, then the video medium is clearly inappropriate for controversial material which calls for an informed, impartial judgment not swayed by such things as "the set, the style, tone, pacing and inflection. . . ." If we are to resist that trendy dissolution of Lutheran substance and identity, which the ELCA's Dr. William Lazareth denounced from bitter experience before the 1988 LC-MS Atlantic District Convention, then we must retain clear, sound, and unambiguous theological language.

ENDNOTES

1. S. Nafzger, *Levels of Fellowship: A Missouri Synod Perspective*, ecumenical conference, Puerto Rico, 30 January 1987, and, by the same author, *Inter-Christian Relations*, circuit counselors' conference, August 1987. This paper was also presented to the conference of the seminary faculties and district presidents, autumn 1987, where a comprehensive counter-proposal and critique by K. Marquart, *Church and Church Fellowship: Evangelical Perspectives*, was also distributed but not formally presented.
2. A Christian's "confession" is not simply what he may verbalize, particularly under the time constraints of a brief interview. A major part of his public confession rather is the altar and pulpit with which he regularly identifies

- himself: "By his partaking of the Sacrament in a church a Christian declares that the confession of that church is his confession. Since a man cannot at the same time hold two differing confessions, he cannot communicate in two churches of differing confessions. If anyone does this nevertheless, he denies his own confession or has none at all" (W. Elert, *Eucharist and Church Fellowship*, p. 182).
3. S. Nafzger, *Levels of Fellowship*, pp. 1-3, *Inter-Christian Relations*, pp. 13-15.
 4. H. Sasse, *Sanctorum Communio in This is My Body* (Adelaide, 1976), pp. 352, 353, 355.
 5. K. Rahner, *Theological Investigations* (New York: Seabury, 1976), XIV, p. 114.
 6. *Synodical Conference Proceedings*, 1961, p. 12.
 7. Hans-Lutz Poetsch, "Lutherische Kirche und Lutherischer Weltbund," *Lutherischer Rundblick*, II, 8-9 (August-September 1954), p. 129.
 8. Edward C. Fendt, *The Struggle for Lutheran Unity and Consolidation in the U.S.A. from the Late 1930s to the Early 1970s* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1980) p. 279.
 9. *Essays on the Lutheran Confessions Basic to Lutheran Cooperation* (LC-MS and NLC, 1961), p. 6.
 10. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
 11. There is, of course, a broader context: From ecumenical theory as it had developed within the World Council of Churches, the idea of "degrees" and "levels" of unity made its way also into Roman Catholicism at Vatican II (1962-1965). See H. Vorgrimler, gen. ed., *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), II, 68-81; 86; 102-108. Of course, if one mixes "human traditions or rites and ceremonies instituted by men" (AC VII) into church unity, then a "levels" approach makes good sense.
 12. M. Franzmann: "There seems to have been a great variety in the organizational manifestations of unity in the New Testament church; but is there any evidence that there was anything like an organizational recognition of fractional obedience to the one Lord?" (*Essays on the Lutheran Confessions*, p. 22).

13. *Lutherischer Rundblick*, XVI, 3 (III. Quarter, 1968), p. 185.
14. Dr. Bohlmann rightly observes that the pastors and church leaders in American Lutheranism are "very sharply divided," and "going in divergent ways that are becoming farther apart rather than closer together." That situation must ultimately be reflected in the laity as well. Already twenty years ago Lawrence K. Kersten's sociological study, *The Lutheran Ethic* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1970), documented significant differences also among the laity and concluded: "Thus, at least in relation to theological beliefs, the Missouri Synod and Wisconsin Synod clergy represent a conservative influence on their laity, and the LCA and ALC clergy a liberalizing influence" (pp. 33-34).
15. C.F.W. Walther: "Just as the Spirit of God [in Jer. 8:8] rejects as an idle boast the Jews' appeal that they had the Holy Scripture, while false doctrine prevailed among them, so also the appeal of the nominal Lutherans to the legally recognized orthodox Symbols among them, is, in view of the false doctrines prevailing among them, to be repudiated as an idle boast" (*True Visible Church*, Thesis XXIII).
16. *European Supporting Documents*, Part III, 31 pp. See also the public letter of 15 July 1961 from Drs. W. Oesch and M. Roentsch to Pres. O. Naumann of the Wisconsin Synod.
17. *Supporting Documents*, pp. 18-19.
18. *Supporting Documents*, p. 6.
19. Oesch and Roentsch, p. 14.
20. *Supporting Documents*, pp. 23-24.
21. Dr. Nafzger himself seems strangely unaware of the far-reaching import of his own reference in footnote 5 of his *Levels of Fellowship* (30 January 1987): "See also Tuomo Mannermaa's treatment of the qualitative and quantitative bases for church fellowship in *Von Preussen Nach Leuenberg* (Hamburg: *Lutherisches Verlagshaus*, 1981), pp. 103 ff." Mannermaa, in fact, meticulously documents the methodological self-contradictions of the Leuenberg Concord, which radically abrogate the Lutheran Confessions, whether with qualitative or quantitative conceptions of church fellowship. The note is intended to support Dr. Nafzger's statement in the text that "it becomes not

only possible, but also perhaps even necessary, to talk about 'Levels of Fellowship' as a possible response to the 'basic challenge of Fundamental Consensus and Fundamental Differences.' " The Mannermaa reference proves exactly the opposite, namely, how baneful and destructive a "levels of fellowship" approach would be. In the same footnote 5, Dr. Nafzger also tries to cite Sasse in support of "levels of fellowship," because Sasse "delineates the various ways the word fellowship is used. . ." But, in the first place, various uses and meanings of the word "fellowship" have no more to do with "levels of fellowship" than the Dog Star has with "levels of dogs." Secondly, in the very book from which Dr. Nafzger is quoting, Sasse argues vigorously not for but against "levels of fellowship" (*We Confess the Church*, p. 67; see above).

22. *By the Way*, October 1988, pp.1-2.
23. It is especially deplorable that the video, although repeatedly identifying Dr. Nafzger as Executive Director of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations, never mentions the important fact that in this matter Dr. Nafzger is expressing only his personal opinion—to which there is strong opposition in the CTCR—and by no means the position of the Commission. In response to protests and concerns the Commission, in fact, resolved in February 1988:

We continue to recognize the present situation in regard to fellowship practices within the Synod as a crisis in our Synod's confessional unity, and

We continue to support the biblical and confessional commitments of the Synod, and

We continue to presume, as we did when we encouraged Dr. Nafzger to present his paper at the Circuit Counselors' Conference, that he speaks as an individual, and not as a representative of the Commission (as is the case with all members of the Commission) when he is presenting his "Levels of Fellowship" essay.

The video exploits the prestige of the CTCR in the interests of a position which is not that of the Commission.